

5/23/83 48080-5 a-

Bureau of Governmental Affairs

University of North Dakota

Grand Forks, North Dakota 58202



April 1983

S.R. #73

VOTER TURNOUT IN NORTH DAKOTA
1952 - 1982

by
Harlan Fuglesten

INTRODUCTION

Prior to each election, political commentators make predictions about the anticipated voter turnout and the consequences a light or heavy vote will have for a political party, candidate or issue. During election day, the news media interview poll workers to gauge voter turnout and make comparisons to past elections. And following the election, campaign workers look to voter turnout figures as at least a partial explanation for their success or failure. Routinely, politicians remind us that it is our patriotic duty to vote, but some critics claim low voter turnout and voter apathy are an indictment of our political system.

Despite all the interest and talk about voter turnout, reliable information about the subject is hard to find and even more difficult to compute. The problem arises because not only must one look at the total votes cast in an election, but one must also compute the number of eligible voters. This computation depends, in turn, on accurate information concerning the size and age distribution of the geographic area under study. Since census data is only available for 10-year intervals, estimates must be used. Frequently these estimates are done crudely with the consequence that voter turnout percentages are often quite inaccurate.

Further complicating the voter turnout picture is the tendency of the media to focus on election comparisons of total votes cast without making any allowance for a change in the number of eligible voters. After the 1980 election, for example,

headlines proclaimed a record voter turnout in North Dakota. While the actual number voting surpassed the previous high voting total by several thousand, the percentage of eligible voters who went to the polls was the lowest in recent state history. Because North Dakota's population has remained quite stable, common sense might suggest that a record total vote should also mean a record percentage vote. Due to a change in the age structure of the population and a lowering of the voting age to 18, however, the number of eligible voters in North Dakota increased by over 100,000 between 1968 and 1980. Thus, it should have been no surprise that the total votes cast would increase at the same time that voter turnout, measured as a percentage of eligible voters, should decline.

This report has the two-fold purpose of describing and explaining voter turnout in North Dakota. First, the author has attempted to compile a base of information on voter turnout by county over the last 30 years using a consistent means of calculation. This should enable the reader to compare turnout among counties and assess turnout trends over a substantial time period. In other words, this report provides information that helps describe which counties have the best and worst turnout rates and what the turnout trends have been.

Second, the author has analyzed a number of differences among counties and changes in the population over time which may account for differences in turnout rates. This analysis should provide a basis for predictions about future voter turnout trends. It should also assist in identifying groups toward which greater efforts must be made in turning out the vote.

METHODOLOGY

Voter turnout figures by county were calculated for each county for each primary and general election from 1952-1982. The turnout percentages for each county were derived by taking the total votes cast in each county and dividing this total into the number of people in the county of voting age.

The federal decennial censuses were used to ascertain the number of voting age residents in each county for the census years 1950, 1960, 1970 and 1980. For elections falling between census years, estimates were made on the basis of straight line interpolation of the population size and the percentage of population of voting age.

An example may be helpful in clarifying this interpolation procedure. Let us suppose that a county had a population of 3,000 in 1960 and 4,000 in 1970. If we want to estimate the population in 1966, we must calculate the increase in population between 1960 and 1970 and attribute a proportionate share of the growth to the time period from 1960 to 1966. We know the population grew by 1,000 during a 10-year interval or an average of 100 people per year. Assuming the population grew at a constant rate, the population of the county would increase from 3,000 in 1960 to 3,600 in 1966. $[3,000 + (6/10 \times 1,000) = 3,600]$. We still do not know how many eligible voters there are in the county, however, because so far we have only dealt with population totals. We must now consider the effect of the change in the age distribution of the population.

Due to the post-war baby boom in the 1950's, the declining birth rates of the 1970's, and the increased life expectancy

throughout the past 30 years, the age structure of the population has undergone a substantial change. Suppose in our hypothetical county that 55 percent of the population was of voting age in 1960 and the figure rose to 60 percent by 1970. This would mean that the number of eligible voters was 1,650 in 1960 ($3,000 \times .55 = 1,650$) and 2,400 in 1970 ($4,000 \times .60 = 2,400$). Since we want to know how many potential voters there were in 1966 we must be able to multiply the estimated population of 3,600 by the percentage of the population of voting age. We know the voting age percentage grew by 5 percent in 10 years or one-half percent per year. Assuming this percentage changed at an equal rate throughout the period, the voting age population would be 58 percent in 1966 [$55 + (6/10 \times 5) = 58$]. Therefore, by multiplying 3,600 by 58 percent the total number of eligible voters in 1966 is estimated to be 2,088.

The above procedure was used to determine the number of eligible voters for every county for each election year from 1952 through 1980. The 1982 election turnout, however, was based on 1980 census data without adjustment. This was done for several reasons. First, no reliable information is available about population changes in counties since 1980. There has been little change in population for the state as a whole, however. Second, because most of the baby boom generation had reached age 18 by 1980, the substantial changes in the voting age population percentage witnessed in the 1970's should have stabilized between 1980 and 1982. Third, due to the poor economic climate in the state during the past couple of years, it

is unlikely that counties have experienced much population change due to migration caused by economic growth. Therefore, rather than extend the trend established between 1970 and 1980, it was decided that a closer estimate of 1982 voting age population by county would be the unadjusted 1980 census figures.

Any method for estimating eligible voters is likely to lead to some inaccuracies. For example, the method used in this report makes no accounting for aliens or felons who are not eligible to vote. Because these groups represent such a small percentage of the total population, it was concluded that they could be ignored safely. A more likely cause for estimation error is when population changes occur rapidly in selected areas of the state. The population estimates, for example, may not fully account for the rapid growth of the western counties during the late 1970's due to energy development. Therefore, individual county turnout figures in any one year may be misleading in some cases. Nevertheless, the overall turnout pattern for a county should be reasonably accurate since any distortions should be smoothed out over time.

In order to explain why the voting turnout rate varies greatly among the counties, an attempt was made to relate county turnout rates to such measurable factors that may influence turnout as age, education and income. To study this relationship, the 1980 general election turnout by county was correlated with 1980 census data on counties to determine what characteristics of counties may account for differences in turnout rates. These relationships will be discussed in detail in the FINDINGS section of this report.

FINDINGS

Turnout Trends

A quick look at historical voting patterns shows that the factor which most influences voter turnout is the type of election held. General elections stir greater voter interest than primaries and presidential elections turn out more voters than "off-year" elections. Therefore, to get a picture of voting trends over the past 30 years, the elections were grouped into four types to consider trends within each type. The four types are presidential year primary elections, presidential year general elections, nonpresidential year primary elections, and nonpresidential year general elections. Graph 1 depicts the turnout trends for these four types of elections.

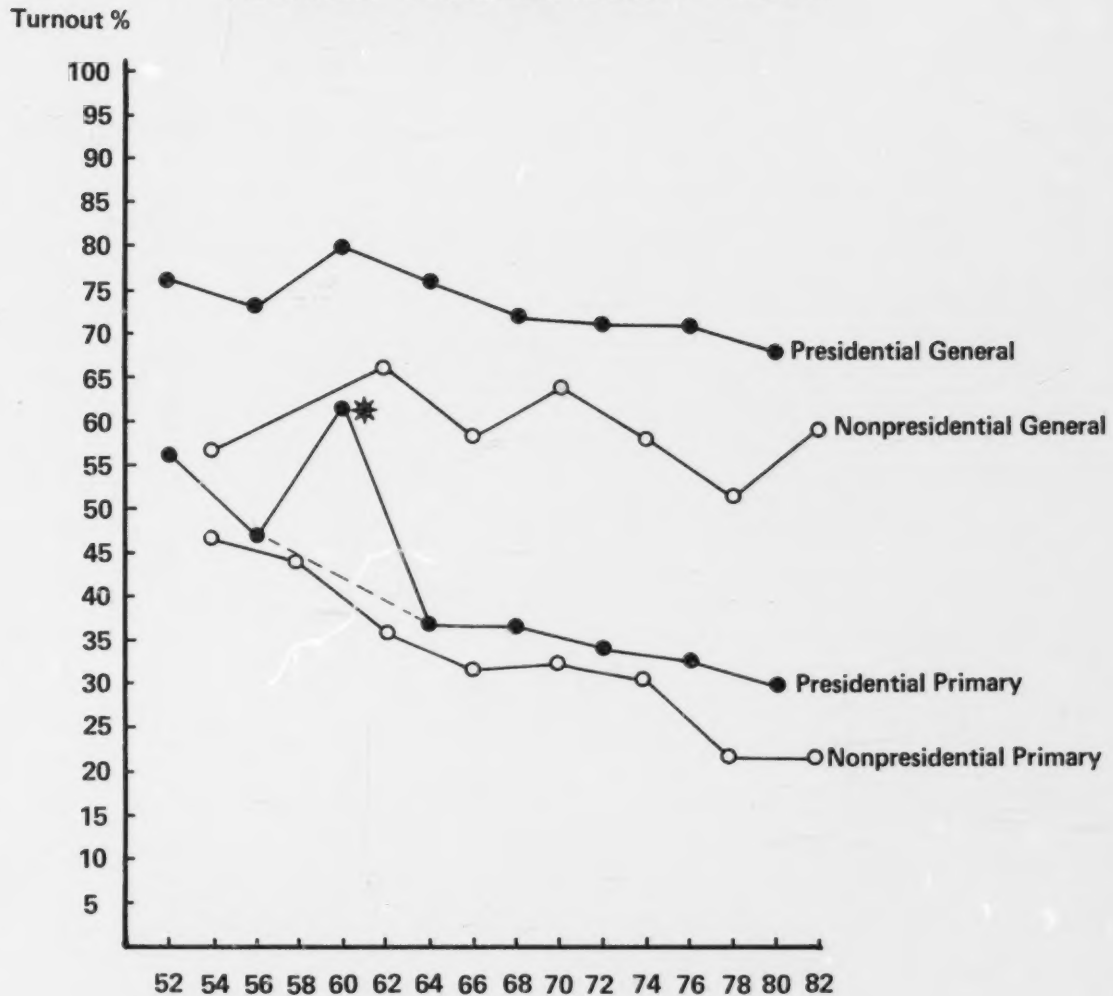
Primary Elections

There is a clear downward trend for turnout in primary elections for both presidential and nonpresidential years. Nonpresidential year primary turnout declined steadily from 47% in 1952 to only 22% in 1978 and 1982. Presidential year primary elections showed the same trend, dropping from 56% in 1952 to 30% in 1980. Turnout increased to 62% in the 1960 primary but this was due to a hotly contested special United States Senate election held in conjunction with the primary.

Much of the slide in voter interest in primary elections undoubtedly reflects the realignment of the Non-partisan League from the Republican Party to the Democratic Party. Prior to 1956 the Non-partisan League faction and the Republican Organizing Committee faction of the Republican Party challenged each other regularly in the primary.

Graph 1

North Dakota Voting Turnout Trends 1952-1982



* A special election to fill a vacancy in a U.S. Senate seat was held in conjunction with the primary in 1960. This election is thus not appropriate for purposes of comparison.

BEST AVAILABLE COPY

Since the winners in the primary almost always won the general election, the primary elections generated substantial interest. As a strong two-party system emerged in the state following the merger of the Non-partisan League with the Democratic Party, the candidates chosen by political conventions were seldom challenged and the primary elections decreased in significance.

While the decline in competition for primary nominations may account for the fall off in voter interest in the 1950's and early 1960's, this factor cannot account for the continuing decline in voter interest in primary elections.

Some politicians have sought to blame low voter turnout in primary elections on the timing of the elections. North Dakota held primary elections in June until after 1964. Noting the slide in voter participation in the June primary, the 1965 legislature changed the primary date to September. In addition to shortening the campaign time between the primary and general elections, proponents of the change hoped that moving the election date would spur greater interest in the primary election. The theory was that during the summer many families are on vacation or distracted by other activities which would not interfere if the primary were held in the fall after school had started. Furthermore, the proponents believed that more voter interest would be generated if the primary were held closer to the general election.

The primary elections were held in September from 1966 through 1980, but following voter approval of a referred measure passed by the 1979 legislature, the primary was changed back to a June date beginning in 1982.

As Graph 1 indicates, the change of primary dates has not appeared to alter the downward trend. The trend began while the primary was held in June, continued after the legislature changed the date to September, and remained low in 1982 when the primary returned to a June date. Therefore, the historical evidence fails to demonstrate that one date is superior to another in promoting voter turnout.

Because most party nominations are uncontested and many county non-partisan office candidates are unopposed, the lack of voter interest in the primaries might be viewed with some nonchalance. It should be remembered, however, that over 150 constitutional amendments and initiated and referred measures have been decided at primary elections in North Dakota. In 1982, for example, important measures such as new constitutional articles relating to the legislative branch of government and political subdivisions were voted on by only about one in five of the state's eligible voters. If the downward trend in voter participation continues in future primary elections, the legislature might well consider avoiding placing important constitutional measures on the primary ballot to be decided by a small minority of voters who may be less representative of the electorate than the legislature itself.

General Election

The downward trend in voter participation experienced in primaries is somewhat less evident for the general elections. The nonpresidential general election turnout has been erratic, fluctuating from a high of 66% in 1962 to a low of 52% in 1978.

It should be noted that in the years 1954, 1958, and 1962 the governor and all other statewide offices were up for election, since two-year terms were in effect in North Dakota until 1964. Therefore, these elections may not be directly comparable to later nonpresidential year general elections. The main factor apparently causing the fluctuating trend line, however, is the presence or absence of a United States Senate contest during the nonpresidential year. Thus, turnout declined in 1966 and 1978 when there were no Senate contests but rebounded in the next nonpresidential year elections when there were Senate races.

The presidential year general elections have shown a small but steady decline in turnout. After reaching an 80% turnout peak in 1960, turnout dropped to 68% in 1980. This North Dakota trend parallels the national trend although North Dakota consistently turns out a much higher percentage of voters than the national average. At the national level, postwar turnout peaked at 62.8% in 1960 and declined to 53.9% in 1980.

In some respects the drop in turnout during this time period is puzzling because factors such as rising income and education levels and reduced residency requirements could have been expected to increase turnout. On the other hand, voter disaffection with the Vietnam War and Watergate may have contributed to political alienation. Also, it appears that the baby boom generation that came of voting age during this period has shown much less inclination to vote than older generations of voters.

County Voting Patterns

Tables 1-4 summarize the voting turnout history of each county over the past 30 years. These tables provide a means to compare each county's turnout for any given election with the statewide average for that election. These tables also show the voting trends for each county over the 30 year period studied.

In order to compare turnout rates among counties, the turnout figures for all the elections listed in Tables 1-4 were averaged for each county. The counties were then ranked from highest to lowest turnout average. This ranking appears in Table 5.

As Table 5 indicates, Billings County is the state's turnout leader. While Billings rates highest on average for both primary and general elections in presidential and nonpresidential years alike, the county's turnout rate in presidential year general elections has been truly phenomenal. From 1960 through 1972, it appears that virtually everyone in the county turned out to vote in the presidential elections. Even in the low turnout years of 1980, 90% of those eligible voted. Billings County, which is located in the Southwest part of the state, is one of the most sparsely populated counties in North Dakota. Billings' neighboring rural counties also score well, with Slope ranking fourth and Golden Valley coming in ninth.

Another part of the state that consistently scores high in turnout is the south central area where Emmons, McIntosh, and Logan counties rank third, sixth, and seventh respectively. In

TABLE 1

VOTER TURNOUT BY COUNTY IN PRESIDENTIAL YEAR
PRIMARY ELECTIONS: 1952-1980

	1952	1956	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	Avg.
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
ADAMS	62	54	61	48	59	44	45	50	53
BARNES	62	50	64	38	39	42	51	38	48
BENSON	63	54	72	49	46	45	40	40	51
BILLINGS	68	65	76	58	78	65	57	55	65
BOTTINEAU	54	48	62	37	43	36	37	40	45
BOWMAN	59	56	64	43	41	35	34	36	46
BURKE	55	42	62	37	44	42	41	43	46
BURLEIGH	57	42	62	44	46	42	33	32	45
CASS	49	39	61	32	27	26	26	20	35
CAVALIER	61	49	65	43	55	39	34	35	48
DICKEY	58	46	69	51	41	54	32	29	48
DIVIDE	64	52	69	40	42	37	39	22	46
DUNN	63	64	70	46	70	47	41	50	56
EDDY	61	47	71	48	53	42	48	48	52
EMMONS	71	64	75	49	46	62	62	54	60
FOSTER	59	51	69	43	42	40	40	41	48
GOLDEN VALLEY	61	58	68	47	52	48	41	49	53
GRAND FORKS	46	35	49	23	21	24	22	18	30
GRANT	62	56	66	50	66	42	43	58	55
GRIGGS	67	54	76	42	44	47	45	46	53
HETTINGER	65	64	69	45	60	43	45	44	54
KIDDER	65	56	68	58	48	39	41	48	53
LaMOURE	68	51	67	38	40	46	47	44	50
LOGAN	70	63	79	53	53	48	41	58	58
McHENRY	60	54	65	40	43	45	47	47	50
McINTOSH	68	56	69	42	49	57	58	47	56
McKENZIE	61	55	64	41	48	41	33	41	48
McLEAN	56	51	66	41	43	38	39	42	47
MERCER	58	52	70	39	63	37	37	34	49
MORTON	55	54	61	37	46	39	38	33	45
MOUNTRAIL	53	44	64	36	38	37	42	37	44
NELSON	72	56	70	40	44	41	44	33	50
OLIVER	67	69	82	48	56	40	45	61	59
PEMBINA	59	39	63	43	32	30	31	26	40
PIERCE	71	65	70	47	48	44	37	44	53
RAMSEY	60	46	66	37	42	36	36	29	44
RANSOM	62	57	69	42	41	36	38	33	47
RENVILLE	58	58	70	41	41	34	42	38	48
RICHLAND	49	42	58	32	32	39	31	31	39
ROLETTE	53	55	58	28	26	20	24	19	35
SARGENT	57	48	70	43	37	41	33	47	47
SHERIDAN	75	72	83	57	57	57	43	54	62
SIOUX	57	57	63	28	29	27	20	25	38
SLOPE	62	62	88	55	60	46	48	58	60
STARK	56	45	61	37	54	27	23	27	41
STEELE	68	62	72	48	54	48	53	51	57
STUTSMAN	48	42	52	29	34	30	35	24	37
TOWNER	55	46	65	38	47	45	35	39	46
TRAILL	63	46	70	44	38	36	35	32	46
WALSH	56	42	54	33	29	33	32	33	39
WARD	44	35	50	25	23	21	26	22	31
WELLS	66	59	72	50	48	49	55	47	56
WILLIAMS	47	45	58	32	30	33	25	25	37
STATE AVERAGE	56%	47%	62%	37%	37%	34%	33%	30%	42%

-15-
TABLE 2

VOTER TURNOUT BY COUNTY IN PRESIDENTIAL YEAR
GENERAL ELECTIONS: 1952-1980

	1952	1956	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	Avg.
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
ADAMS	81	79	85	82	79	79	81	80	81
BARNES	79	75	82	80	76	76	76	75	77
BENSON	79	77	87	85	80	78	78	75	80
BILLINGS	86	82	99	97	97	100	93	90	93
BOTTINEAU	75	72	81	78	78	77	77	76	77
BOWMAN	81	74	82	80	73	74	78	78	78
BURKE	74	66	80	80	80	75	75	76	76
BURLEIGH	74	66	81	77	77	77	74	74	75
CASS	74	74	79	74	70	71	72	68	73
CAVALIER	81	74	89	85	85	98	86	77	84
DICKEY	79	77	83	82	79	79	78	75	79
DIVIDE	83	76	81	77	73	73	81	67	76
DUNN	82	79	86	84	80	79	75	80	81
EDDY	75	77	85	83	81	79	84	79	80
EMMONS	85	81	91	85	80	88	81	83	84
FOSTER	79	77	87	81	79	80	80	75	80
GOLDEN VALLEY	81	78	91	83	78	81	77	88	82
GRAND FORKS	67	64	71	61	58	57	60	53	61
GRANT	83	78	85	82	80	76	79	84	81
GRIGGS	82	77	88	86	83	84	86	82	84
HETTINGER	83	80	86	82	80	79	80	81	81
KIDDER	86	75	87	84	79	77	81	77	81
LaMOURE	83	82	84	82	80	81	81	76	81
LOGAN	81	80	90	83	84	84	79	85	83
McHENRY	82	76	82	78	77	81	79	77	79
McINTOSH	82	81	87	78	79	85	81	84	82
McKENZIE	81	78	82	79	77	76	73	74	78
McLEAN	77	72	81	77	75	76	76	77	76
MERCER	80	79	86	77	80	82	68	77	79
MORTON	79	74	80	73	71	75	74	72	75
MOUNTRAIL	74	67	78	74	70	71	73	73	73
NELSON	82	80	88	84	83	80	80	70	81
OLIVER	84	76	90	77	77	78	80	85	81
PEMBINA	77	68	85	80	73	78	76	68	76
PIERCE	87	83	87	84	84	79	76	75	82
RAMSEY	79	76	86	83	79	79	78	72	79
RANSOM	82	83	86	80	76	74	76	69	78
RENVILLE	78	73	86	81	79	79	78	78	79
RICHLAND	75	73	81	77	76	71	76	68	75
ROLETTE	65	65	75	72	64	61	60	53	64
SARGENT	77	79	85	83	81	81	83	78	81
SHERIDAN	86	83	88	87	85	90	80	84	85
SIOUX	81	75	81	70	70	67	64	59	71
SLOPE	83	79	95	90	87	86	93	87	88
STARK	75	62	79	77	76	66	62	57	69
STEELE	83	82	87	89	87	85	87	88	86
STUTSMAN	68	65	71	67	66	65	66	62	66
TOWNER	79	76	85	81	79	82	79	76	80
TRAILL	80	78	85	83	79	77	80	75	80
WALSH	74	66	76	73	70	70	71	67	71
WARD	70	62	68	63	56	57	60	56	62
WELLS	81	79	86	84	81	82	80	79	82
WILLIAMS	72	75	78	75	72	67	64	66	71
STATE AVERAGE	76%	73%	80%	76%	72%	71%	71%	68%	73%

TABLE 3

VOTER TURNOUT BY COUNTY IN NONPRESIDENTIAL YEAR
PRIMARY ELECTIONS: 1954-1982

	1954	1958	1962	1966	1970	1974	1978	1982	Avg.
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
ADAMS	42	48	41	45	47	37	17	45	40
BARNES	50	44	37	39	38	43	24	40	39
BENSON	59	60	49	42	40	40	33	35	45
BILLINGS	68	64	75	47	52	46	40	34	53
BOTTINEAU	41	47	38	34	30	36	28	24	32
BOWMAN	60	47	40	29	29	29	31	39	38
BURKE	42	45	45	41	36	44	29	36	40
BURLEIGH	41	41	41	38	39	34	14	14	33
CASS	38	37	30	27	24	23	16	11	24
CAVALIER	49	48	42	26	39	38	24	29	37
DICKEY	52	51	35	50	47	29	26	40	41
DIVIDE	51	53	38	39	41	50	39	48	45
DUNN	60	59	47	47	40	42	27	28	44
EDDY	48	50	41	36	40	40	35	51	43
EMMONS	67	57	44	52	45	52	44	43	51
FOSTER	48	44	43	37	48	40	35	30	41
GOLDEN VALLEY	45	65	49	54	48	40	48	55	44
GRAND FORKS	30	27	21	20	22	19	10	17	21
GRANT	54	60	44	42	48	50	32	37	46
GRIGGS	47	48	37	44	43	49	65	32	46
HETTINGER	51	61	49	42	41	36	32	21	42
KIDDER	55	50	48	49	46	51	31	40	46
LaMOURE	86	44	33	28	43	48	38	33	44
LOGAN	65	62	56	41	50	46	29	42	49
McHENRY	54	50	42	44	49	44	36	25	43
McINTOSH	69	59	50	60	53	46	44	46	53
McKENZIE	55	50	47	43	43	41	33	19	41
McLEAN	56	51	37	28	33	35	21	29	36
MERCER	56	50	49	48	36	27	22	28	40
MORTON	48	48	39	32	39	40	19	16	35
MOUNTRAIL	43	46	34	30	34	40	26	25	35
NELSON	52	50	35	39	40	46	35	33	41
OLIVER	71	61	63	39	41	32	44	32	48
PEMBINA	44	55	43	26	26	30	26	15	33
PIERCE	63	70	59	50	49	43	25	36	49
RAMSEY	50	52	39	33	33	43	34	28	39
RANSOM	64	57	58	39	41	37	33	32	45
RENVILLE	51	51	39	31	34	36	34	33	39
RICHLAND	50	41	31	33	34	28	20	26	33
ROLETTE	42	47	31	19	34	32	21	20	31
SARGENT	56	48	42	42	37	40	35	36	42
SHERIDAN	66	66	65	60	49	39	26	45	52
SIOUX	53	53	28	38	22	41	26	30	36
SLOPE	57	64	66	38	38	55	40	33	49
STARK	41	38	39	32	32	23	19	20	31
STEELE	55	56	55	43	57	45	49	45	51
STUTSMAN	48	37	31	31	30	33	17	21	31
TOWNER	51	54	37	33	34	39	14	28	36
TRAILL	49	47	38	32	32	37	29	27	36
WALSH	43	39	32	31	27	31	22	31	32
WARD	35	29	25	17	19	19	16	18	22
WELLS	51	56	42	31	36	44	31	46	42
WILLIAMS	41	40	30	33	28	26	20	13	29
STATE AVERAGE	47%	44%	36%	32%	33%	31%	22%	22%	33%

TABLE 4

VOTER TURNOUT BY COUNTY IN NONPRESIDENTIAL YEAR
GENERAL ELECTIONS: 1954-1982

	1954 %	1958 %	1962 %	1966 %	1970 %	1974 %	1978 %	1982 %	Avg. %
ADAMS	59	65	73	71	76	65	55	67	66
BARNES	60	61	68	67	70	68	56	67	65
BENSON	68	76	78	71	76	66	62	66	70
BILLINGS	72	73	99	76	87	75	70	76	79
BOTTINEAU	58	66	70	66	70	61	62	66	65
BOWMAN	65	61	71	56	64	64	62	69	64
BURKE	56	60	70	62	68	62	69	69	65
BURLEIGH	51	53	69	61	67	60	51	63	59
CASS	52	60	61	50	57	54	51	58	55
CAVALIER	66	71	70	60	74	69	62	64	67
DICKEY	63	68	70	68	70	67	58	67	66
DIVIDE	68	72	70	68	69	71	67	78	70
DUNN	69	68	78	66	73	65	58	78	69
EDDY	70	66	73	64	75	70	70	76	71
EMMONS	80	75	74	77	81	77	76	73	77
FOSTER	62	68	72	62	80	68	67	62	68
GOLDEN VALLEY	66	70	79	69	72	72	73	91	74
GRAND FORKS	42	45	48	38	46	43	38	42	43
GRANT	65	70	73	69	76	86	67	71	72
GRIGGS	63	72	80	74	77	75	88	77	76
HETTINGER	65	67	80	65	73	63	57	68	67
KIDDER	60	64	75	71	76	73	59	74	69
LaMOURE	67	65	72	58	75	73	65	66	68
LOGAN	66	76	77	70	81	74	60	74	72
McHENRY	65	67	72	70	77	70	65	69	69
McINTOSH	72	69	76	80	82	75	72	79	76
McKENZIE	64	68	70	68	71	63	48	64	65
McLEAN	61	66	68	61	69	63	61	68	65
MERCER	73	59	74	73	70	56	42	67	64
MORTON	59	61	67	57	64	63	50	59	54
MOUNTRAIL	57	64	65	62	65	60	55	62	61
NELSON	59	72	72	68	75	69	64	65	68
OLIVER	74	69	79	64	71	64	71	78	71
PEMBINA	56	66	66	47	63	66	63	57	61
PIERCE	70	80	82	73	80	69	59	63	72
RAMSEY	60	66	71	66	73	70	67	65	67
RANSOM	66	69	76	64	70	64	59	62	66
RENVILLE	68	72	71	68	76	68	65	70	70
RICHLAND	55	59	65	57	67	57	53	57	59
ROLETTE	59	60	61	43	63	45	37	46	52
SARGENT	62	66	73	68	75	68	63	69	68
SHERIDAN	65	78	83	77	80	66	63	71	73
SIOUX	66	63	55	62	60	60	60	54	60
SLOPE	65	75	89	64	73	77	78	71	74
STARK	53	47	68	60	66	50	47	60	56
STEELE	68	72	84	74	82	75	75	82	77
STUTSMAN	48	54	56	53	58	54	50	54	53
TOWNER	60	73	72	62	72	68	54	67	66
TRAILL	59	69	75	64	70	66	65	65	67
WALSH	53	55	56	52	59	55	53	61	56
WARD	46	45	51	47	46	44	42	49	46
WELLS	64	70	77	66	74	68	62	70	69
WILLIAMS	58	60	61	60	63	54	46	53	57
STATE AVERAGE	57%	61%	66%	58%	64%	58%	52%	59%	59%

TABLE 5

COUNTY TURNOUT RANKING 1952-1982

Rank	County	Rank	County
1	Billings	28	Renville
2	Sheridan	29	Dickey
3	Emmons	30	McKenzie
4	Slope	31	Mercer
5	Steele	32	Barnes
6	McIntosh	33	Ramsey
7	Logan	34	Towner
8	Griggs	34	Traill
9	Golden Valley	36	Burke
10	Oliver	37	Bowman
11	Pierce	38	McLean
12	Grant	39	Bottineau
13	Dunn	40	Morton
14	Kidder	41	Mountrail
15	Wells	42	Burleigh
16	Benson	43	Pembina
17	Eddy	44	Richland
18	Hettinger	44	Sioux
19	LaMoure	46	Stark
20	McHenry	47	Walsh
21	Adams	48	Williams
22	Nelson	49	Cass
23	Sargent	50	Rolette
24	Divide	51	Stutsman
25	Ransom	52	Ward
26	Foster	53	Grand Forks
27	Cavalier		

central North Dakota, two counties show a strong voting tendency. Sheridan County ranks second statewide and Oliver ranks tenth.

The only eastern counties to make the top ten turnout list are Steele in fifth place and Griggs in eighth place. Map 1 shows the geographic distribution of the ten counties with the highest turnout rate as well as the ten counties with the poorest turnout performance.

One feature that each of the highest turnout counties share is that they are all rural in character and contain no large urban areas. By contrast, all but two of the lowest turnout counties contain at least one of North Dakota's 15 largest cities. The two counties that rank low but contain no urban areas are Sioux and Rolette Counties, both of which include Indian reservations.

The two counties with the poorest overall voting performance are Grand Forks and Ward. Both these counties contain large air force bases. While air force base personnel are eligible to vote in North Dakota if they have lived in the state 30 days, most choose not to vote in the state. This factor has undoubtedly contributed to the low turnout rate in these two counties. Nevertheless, even before the air bases were built these counties ranked at the bottom of the turnout list. Thus, other factors must also be considered in explaining these results.

Explanatory Variables

To ascertain what influences a county's turnout tendencies, the voter turnout for the 1980 general election was compared with data from the 1980 census and other information to see if any factors could logically help to explain turnout differences among counties. The factors considered will be discussed individually and then the interrelationships among these factors will be explored.

Income

Other studies on voter turnout have demonstrated a relationship between income and voter turnout. As might be expected, as income rises, the tendency to vote increases.

In order to evaluate whether this relationship between income and voting occurs in North Dakota, this study correlated the median household income for each county to county voter turnout data. The results indicated a very slight negative correlation which was not statistically significant. In other words, income provides no help in explaining the differences in turnout among counties. This finding may not be too surprising in a rural state such as North Dakota because farm income is subject to substantial fluctuation and economic status is often determined more by property ownership than income. Since this study deals only with aggregate county data, no conclusions about how income affects individual voting decisions can be made. Nevertheless, since income appears to have no influence on county turnout performance, no further analysis of this factor is appropriate.

Education

Just as one might predict that voter turnout should increase as income rises, a higher educational level should be associated with a greater voting tendency. To compare educational levels among counties, the percentage of the population 18 years of age or older with at least a high school education was calculated. These percentages were then correlated with county voter turnout figures. The results indicated a small to moderate negative correlation which was statistically significant. In other words, there is a tendency for turnout to be less in counties with a high percentage of high school graduates. This result appears to be at odds with voting behavior theory and common sense.

This anomaly is probably accounted for in large part by the dominance of other factors which are closely related to the high school graduate percentage. For example, the percentage of people who graduate from high school has been very high in recent years, especially compared to the percentage who graduated in the 1930's and 1940's. This observation would suggest that educational level is related to the age distribution of the population. This theory was tested by correlating the percentage of high school graduates with the percentage of county residents between ages 18-29. The resulting correlation demonstrated a strong relationship between these variables. As the following discussion of the age factor will demonstrate, this age distribution factor explains more than the education factor. Therefore, the negative relationship found between education level and turnout is probably illusory.

Consequently, we cannot conclude that education is a significant factor in explaining county turnout rates.

Age Distribution

A 1978 Census Bureau study found that people 65 years and older were almost three times more likely to vote in congressional elections than 18 to 20 year-olds. Other studies confirm that voting is a habit that takes time to acquire. Voting is generally lowest among those under 30 but rises steadily thereafter as people buy homes, raise families and become more active in civic affairs.

Because of the strong tendency toward nonvoting among young people, the relationship between county turnout rates and the percentage of the voting age population between 18-29 was tested. One should expect that counties with a high turnout rate would have a low percentage of young people 18 to 29 and vice versa. The results of a statistical correlation showed that the percentage of young people 18 to 29 is a very significant turnout factor which by itself accounts for about one-third of observed differences in county turnout rates.

The counties with a high percentage of young people tend to be the urban counties. For example, in Grand Forks, Ward, and Cass counties over 40 percent of the electorate is between 18 and 29 years old. By contrast, rural counties such as McIntosh, Nelson, Burke, Divide, and Emmons have fewer than 20 percent in this age group. This relationship between young people and urbanness was tested by correlating the percentage of voting age population against a county density factor. The results

showed an extremely strong and positive correlation. Thus, it is necessary to look more closely at population density to ascertain how this factor may influence or help explain voter turnout.

Population Density

The relationship between voter turnout and urban or rural residence is not clear. Studies in other parts of the country have found relationships going both ways. One possible reason for this variation, as noted above, is that the urban-rural factor tends to be interrelated with other factors such as age distribution. In some cases, it is also difficult to distinguish between urban and rural or decide where to draw the line.

One measure that has been used to differentiate areas is population density expressed as the number of people per square mile of area. This measure was used in this report to represent the urban or rural character of a county. When these density figures were correlated against county turnout rates, a moderately strong negative relationship was found. This means that counties with a low density population (rural) turnout to vote at a higher rate than high density urban counties. This supports the conventional political wisdom in North Dakota that the farmers vote in higher numbers than city dwellers.

Population Stability

Although the statistics show that rural people in North Dakota tend to vote in greater percentages than their city counterparts, this does not necessarily imply that rural living makes one a better citizen. As previously noted, factors such as age distribution which may vary on an urban-rural basis can also influence turnout. Likewise, rural areas tend to have a more stable population because people have ties to the land. Urban areas, on the other hand, tend to have more mobile populations made up of college students, laborers, and business and professional people. It seems reasonable to assume that the longer one has lived in an area, the greater will be his involvement in the community and his commitment to vote. Therefore, measurement of population stability could help to explain county voter turnout.

Two measures of population stability were derived from the 1980 census, the percentage of the population residing in the county for five years and the percentage of native born North Dakotans in the county. The results of the correlation of these measures with county voter turnout showed that there was a small to moderate relationship that was statistically significant. Therefore, it appears that population stability may also influence voter turnout rates. Again, however, it is difficult to separate the independent effects of the population stability variables from other variables.

Reagan Popularity

In the 1980 election, the dominant political influence on the election was the popularity of Ronald Reagan. To determine whether or how Reagan's popularity may have influenced voter turnout, his vote percentage for each county was correlated with the county turnout rates for the 1980 general election. The results showed a strong positive correlation. This finding suggests that Reagan's popularity stimulated voter turnout in counties where his popularity was greatest. Another interpretation which cannot be ignored, however, is that Reagan ran strongest in areas which naturally have a high voter turnout such as stable rural areas with older population age distributions.

Ancestry

The 1980 census provides some interesting information on the ethnic background of the state's residents. While the state has residents representing all races and national origins, Germans and to a lesser extent Norwegians are the predominant ethnic groups, and the only ones large enough to study statistically.

To ascertain whether counties with a higher percentage of Germans or Norwegians tend to turn out to vote at a higher or lower rate, the percentages of single ancestry Germans and Norwegians in each county were correlated to the county turnout rates. The results indicate that there was a small to moderate positive relationship between German ancestry and voting which was statistically significant. By contrast, there was a slight

negative relationship between Norwegian ancestry and voting, but this finding was not statistically significant. In other words, there appears to be a tendency among people of German ancestry to vote at a higher rate than average. No conclusions about the voting behavior of Norwegians can be made from these results. This may be due to the fact that the number of people of Norwegian ancestry may not be large enough to influence the results of aggregate data such as county voter turnout rates. Likewise, no other groups are large enough to study in this manner.

Multiple Variables

Despite efforts to categorize people or predict their behavior based on known variables, there remain social and cultural differences among people which simply cannot be translated into simple figures. Why one person votes and another person with a similar background does not vote is still a mystery that behavioral scientists have yet to unravel. Nevertheless, by studying the voting turnout rates among counties and relating this to several other variables we can at least attempt a partial explanation to account for differences in voting among counties. To test the cumulative explanatory power of all of the variables considered in this report, a statistical technique called multiple regression analysis was employed. This technique correlates the combined influence of all the variables acting simultaneously on the turnout rates for each county. The result of this analysis showed that age distribution, the Reagan vote,

population density and stability, and German ancestry provide an explanation for slightly more than half of the difference in turnout among counties. While this leaves some turnout differences unexplained, this report does provide a basis for concluding that these factors have a significant influence on voter turnout.

CONCLUSIONS

This report has reviewed 30 years of voter turnout history in North Dakota in an attempt to describe county turnout patterns and statewide turnout trends. In addition, this study has sought to identify some factors that influence the differences in turnout rates among counties. An analysis of the data in this report supports the following conclusions:

1. In general, the statewide turnout trend has been downward. Participation in primary elections has dropped sharply and there has been a steady decline in presidential year general election turnout since 1960. Turnout in nonpresidential year general elections has fluctuated mainly because of greater interest in years when there is a United States Senate contest.
2. The poor voter turnout rate in primary elections appears to be unrelated to the primary election date. The turnout rate has continued to decline despite change in the primary election date from June to September and then back to June.
3. The turnout rate varies substantially according to the type of election. Turnout is far greater in presidential years and general elections than in nonpresidential years and primary elections.
4. The turnout rate among counties can vary greatly. For example, it is not uncommon to find some counties turning out the vote at twice the rate of other counties.
5. Rural counties tend to have higher turnout rates than counties with major urban populations. An analysis of the relationship between county population density and turnout rate also

supports this observation. As density increases the turnout rate tends to decline.

6. Counties with a high percentage of younger people tend to have lower turnout rates than counties with an older age distribution. This lends support to the common observation that young people have poorer voting habits than older citizens.

7. The stability of a county's population appears to be another factor which helps to explain differences in turnout rates. The less mobile the population, the greater will be the voter turnout rate.

8. In the 1980 election, President Reagan's voting strength was related to county turnout rates. This may suggest that Reagan's popularity stimulated voter turnout or it may support the theory that Republicans tend to turn out in greater numbers than Democrats.

9. Ancestry may be a factor influencing voter turnout. This study demonstrated a positive relationship between German ancestry and high voter turnout. No other relationships could be established, however, due to limitations in the data and the statistical techniques used.

10. No relationship could be established between income and voter turnout. This may be due to the fact that in a rural state income is not always a reliable measure of economic status.

11. It appears that in North Dakota the turnout rate for those people with less than a high school education may be greater than for those with at least a high school education.

This probably does not support a conclusion that more education leads to lower turnout, but rather it reflects the fact that older citizens with less education are voting at higher rates than younger citizens who happen to be more highly educated.